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**Heroes Wear Dupattas:
Muslim Representation in American Comic Books**

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Report

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Abstract

Heroes Wear Dupattas:

Muslim Representation in American Comic Books

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In this report, I argue that comic books are a cultural site for the construction of Muslim religious identity in the United States. Comic book Muslim superheroes are as much markers of religious identity, as Qur’anic verses or prescriptive *hadith*. With the new American Muslim character, Ms. Marvel, in mind, I focus on the ways Muslims have been constructed as heroes in comic books and how that works to shape their religious identity for a popular audience. Analyzing comic books from two major comic book publishers, Marvel and DC, I identify three types of Muslim heroes: Magical Muslims, Black Muslims, and Outsider Muslims. Until Marvel Comics created the character Kamala Khan, Muslim superheroes fit one of these three types. These were the representational limits of good Islam in popular culture. But Kamala Khan was made to challenge these limits, even as she was intended to continue the lineage of *Ms. Marvel*. In contrast to the characters that fit the earlier types, members of the American Muslim community have played a key role constructing Kamala Khan’s religious identity, which has effectively changed the narrative

surrounding Muslim representation in the comic world. With a different authorship than the previous types, Kamala is both an American Muslim and a cultural hero. And she has been called upon by comic readers and street artists alike, to combat negative images and stereotypes that affect the Muslim community.

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INTRODUCTION

“Stomp out Racism / Stop The Hate.” In 2014, two street artist groups took action to defend American Muslims against what they considered anti-Muslim hate speech in San Francisco. On the side of a city bus, members of the Bay Area Art Queens Unleashing Power (BAAQUP) and Street Cred, painted the image of Kamala Khan, the 16-year old American Muslim superhero. Appropriating Marvel Comics’ newest superhero, they used the image of Kamala Khan to “deface” the anti-Muslim ad paid for by Pamela Geller’s American Freedom Defense Initiative.¹ The original content of Geller’s bus-wide message read, “Islamic Jew Hatred, It’s In The Qur’an.” That xenophobic and Islamophobic message was paired with an image of Haj Amin al-Husseini, a Palestinian 20th Arab Nationalist living in Mandatory Palestine, meeting Adolf Hitler, historical placeholder of recognizable evil (Seyigh, 1997). Geller commissioned this bus ad, along with forty-nine more, to help “sound the alarm about the supposed encroachment of Sharia, or Islamic law (Shipler, 2015).” Responding to the false association of Middle Eastern Islam with German Nazi terror, the street artists summoned a Muslim superhero, Kamala Khan, to stomp out the racism and stop the hate.

The BAAQUP and Street Cred artists released a statement to the public explaining, “We took action because Pamela Geller's repeated hate speech campaigns have normalized Islamophobia and verbal violence in the community we love. We appreciate what Marvel has done in introducing Kamala Khan, who gives young Muslims a positive image of

¹ Designated by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a hate group, although Geller represents herself as a “human rights activist.”

themselves and their power (Wang, 2015)." San Francisco's street response to these anti-Muslim ads shows how images from comic books can be used to tackle real world issues. Writer of the Ms. Marvel series, G. Willow Wilson - an American Muslim herself - Tweeted her response: "Some amazing person has been painting over the anti-Muslim bus ads in SF with Ms. Marvel graffiti. Spread love," and followed this sentiment with, "To me, the graffiti is part of the back-and-forth of the free speech conversation. Call and response. Argument, counterargument."

In this report, I argue that comic books are a cultural site for the construction of Muslim religious identity in the United States. The bulk of academic scholarship and media coverage on global Islam focuses on doctrinal debates and theological prescriptions as defining features of "Muslimness." But as scholars of American religions have demonstrated, religion is more than just sacred texts, and religious identities exceed sectarian limits. Religion is lived and practiced across institutional structures, and is made and manifest within the realm of popular culture (Lofton 2011: 10). Comic book Muslim superheroes are as much markers of religious identity as Quranic verse or prescriptive Hadith. Breaking from recent scholarship, with Ms. Marvel in mind, I focus on the ways Muslims have been constructed as heroes in comic books and how that works to shape their religious identity for a popular audience. Analyzing comic books from two major comic book publishers, Marvel and DC, I identify three types of Muslim heroes: Magical Muslims, Black Muslims, and Outsider Muslims. Until Marvel Comics created the character Kamala Khan, Muslim superheroes fit one of these three types. These were the representational limits of good Islam in popular culture. But Kamala Khan was made to

challenge these limits, even as she was intended to continue the lineage of *Ms. Marvel*.² In contrast to the characters that fit the earlier types, members of the American Muslim community have played a key role constructing Kamala Khan's religious identity, which has effectively changed the narrative surrounding Muslim representation in the comic world. With a different authorship than the previous types, Kamala is both an American Muslim and a cultural hero. And she has been called upon by comic readers and street artists alike, to combat negative images and stereotypes that affect the Muslim community.

In 2013, AFDI began commissioning these ant-Muslim ads in major metropolitan areas like Washington DC and New York City. Kamala Khan made her first appearance in *Captain Marvel #17* (DeConnick, 2013) that same year. She officially became the first Muslim superhero to headline her own series in February of 2014, as the AFDI started its campaign in San Francisco. Kamala is significant for the comic book world in two ways: (1) in taking over the *Ms. Marvel* series, she is the first Muslim to headline her own comic book for a mainstream³ publisher, and (2) she is the first major American Muslim character. The choice to create a new and more diverse hero, is as much a direct confrontation of stereotypes existent in the American comic book industry as it is a response to the more vocal and growing female comic readership and one-part (Hennon, 2014).

² In the same way Mahmood Mamdani identified the necessity of American culture to distinguish "good" from "bad" Muslim, comic books do this in an overt way, hero vs. villain, the latter of which makes up the majority of major Muslim characters.

³ I have distinguished mainstream, by the level of production and notoriety of the publisher, the two juggernauts being Marvel and DC comics, but are differentiated between Marvel and DC proper and their imprints for more adult comics (ex. Milestone, Vertigo, MAX Comics).

In an interview with the popular website *Hero Complex*, Wilson notes that the stereotypes and tropes associated with Kamala's cultural identity, religious identity, and gender present when her and co-creator, editor Sana Amanat – who is Pakistani-American – were creating the character. When Wilson and Amanat were choosing Kamala's super powers, they wanted to avoid the passive powers – like mind reading, force fields, and invisibility – routinely granted to female characters. Wilson chose to give Kamala powers that were kinetic in nature and able to mirror the journey as both a superhero and teenage girl. The choice was made to make Kamala a polymorph, allowing her to change her body and physical appearance in any way imaginable⁴. Her power, like her ethnicity, is usually reserved for villains. The ability to change face, body, and even species has been utilized by villains to deceive heroes and lead them astray⁵. Instead of using her abilities for deception, Wilson and Adrian Alphona (the main illustrator) use her abilities to visually showcase the struggles of a teenage girl coming into her own skin, often feeling the need to mimic others for acceptance. In her personal life, it makes her want to shrink to an unseeable size when confronted with the resident mean girl, and as she comes into her heroic name, she feels the need to mimic other blonde, tall, and curvy superheroes (*Ms. Marvel Vol #1*, Wilson and Alphona, 2014).

Throughout the character creation process, Wilson and Amanat were also aware of the implications a Muslim superhero would have for the Muslim community outside of the

⁴ Everything from “embiggening” her fists and shrinking her body to changing into her mother.

⁵ The most well-known polymorph is Mystique, a super villain in opposition to the X-Men whose main storylines involve her changing her appearance to gain the trust of the young mutants being trained at the academy.

comic book universe. “I think people, especially in the Muslim community, are rightly cautious any time you hear, ‘Oh, there’s going to be a Muslim character,’” Wilson explains in her interview, “People’s guard immediately goes up because often what are portrayed in the media as ‘sympathetic’ characters end up rehashing the same stereotypes and racist baggage that all of the unsympathetic characters have reflected (Hennon, 2014).”

In the United States, representations of Muslims in the public space are most prominently controlled by groups like ADFI and other non-Muslims. Pamela Geller alone actively promotes and is a part of no less than five “watch dog” groups⁶ that are actively working to show the “dangers of Islam.” These groups perpetuate the idea that Islam and more specifically, American Muslims, are a threat to communities in United States. These negative representations of Muslim religious identity work to ostracize Muslims from the public space and cause physical, property and emotional damage⁷ to the various Islamic communities across the United States⁸. Although it is easy to dismiss Geller and other like her as examples rare occurrences or extremist views, in the 2016 presidential race, American Muslims have been the target in numerous campaign speeches of almost every GOP presidential candidate. From Donald Trump calling for a ban on Muslims and for American Muslims to wear identifiable symbols, to Ben Carson claiming that Islam itself

⁶ Jihad Watch, Now the End Begins, Unmasking the Muslim Brotherhood in America, Understanding the Threat, and Discover the Networks, to name a few.

⁷ Charles Taylor notes in *Multiculturalism* that the negative representation and misrepresentation of minority groups causes irreparable damages to individuals in the community.

⁸ In 2015, following the rise in anti-Islamic rhetoric by political presidential candidates and increased activity by radical groups like ISIS, Mosque vandalization tripled in the United States (Council on American-Islamic Relations -- CAIR).

is unable to exist in congruence with the Constitution, Muslims are vilified in the public space. The rhetoric in the 2016 presidential race can be considered a triumph for those like Geller who were long considered on the fringe of political thought in the United States.⁹ Although political rhetoric is important to the ways that Muslim religious identity is constructed in the United States, popular culture has also served as an outlet for its construction in both positive and negative ways.

Popular culture has served as a technology of identity, constructing the identities of religious groups for the audiences consuming popular images (Weisenfeld, 2007). This technology, as described by Judith Weisenfeld in *Hollywood Be Thy Name*, is a legitimizing mechanism that helps to “structure our lives in public and material ways as well as in more subtle a veiled ways of which we are hardly aware.” In her study, she shows how the medium of film worked to establish both Black racial and religious identities by creating and reproducing ideas of race that colored the audiences’ views of the people they were watching. For most minority groups, their identities have largely - if not entirely – been constructed by authors, illustrators and filmmakers outside of the represented groups. Using Weisenfeld’s model, the religious identities of Muslims have been “produced, reproduced, and regulated” through popular culture. For Muslims in the United States, their identities have been created by non-Muslims in film, news, politics, and for the purpose of this report, in comic books.

⁹ In Nathan Lean’s *Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims*, those like the ADFI are explained to be within a highly organized and well-funded system that works through religious leaders, pundits, and bloggers to solidify the ideas of “creeping sharia” and the “stealth jihad” within American society.

The Muslim heroes existing in comics prior to 2014 embody popular stereotypes and tropes, that help shape what it means to be a Muslim for their audiences. Since the inherent nature of comics is to pit good against evil - hero against villain - they serve as sources routinely focused on morals and ideals. Heroes are also meant to serve as real world role models for their readers to emulate. It is no surprise then, that in the current climate, Muslim characters have overwhelmingly been made villains. According to Comicbookreligion.com, an online database that tracks the religious affiliations, there are around 270 Muslims in comics. Of these, 124 are listed as villains and 65 (as of September of 2014) are listed as heroes, with the remaining Muslims identified as side characters¹⁰ or historical figures. The 65 heroes that serve as the focus of this report, present readers with representations of Muslims that are to be emulated or are immediately understood as “good guys.” Comic books, present the audience with examples of Islam and Muslim heroes, effectively creating a type of Muslim that should be accepted in their American community.

The study of Muslims in American comic books is relatively limited¹¹. The bulk of these studies focuses on the construction of Muslims as the villains and more importantly the portrayal of Arab Muslims. The intense focus on the representations of Arabs and Arab Muslims is not fault of the scholar. By and large, the Muslims portrayed in various forms of media have been highly racialized. So much so, that Arab identity is indistinguishable from Muslim identity. Jack Shaheen, addressed this racialization of Islam in the film

¹⁰ Cab drivers, defendants in a courtroom or nameless actors like terrorist 1 and terrorist 2.

¹¹ Jack Shaheen (1994), Jehanzeb Dar (2010), and most recently Fredrik Stromberg in 2011.

industry. Shaheen points out that moviemakers ignore the reality of Muslims¹² in favor of “depicting Arabs and Muslims as one and the same people. Repeatedly, they falsely project all Arabs as Muslims and all Muslims as Arabs. As a result, viewers, too, tend to link the same attributes to both peoples (Shaheen, second ed., 2009).” In addition to the study of Arab Muslim representations, there have been articles analyzing one Muslim character at a time or the interactions of Muslim interactions with non-Muslim protagonists. To my knowledge, Fredrik Stromberg’s 2011 article, which focused on issues of representation in comic books after 9/11, is the only scholarship engaging the Muslim hero and not the villain while analyzing various heroic identities¹³.

Comic book writers intend for their heroes to be emulated, they hold our ideals and our highest of morals. They serve as representatives of what we believe is good¹⁴. In the early days of comics, there was an oath the reader could take, in order to be like the characters they were reading. For example, the early issues of *Superman* contained a pledge to be taken by the reader, in order to join the story in the real world:

This certifies that: (insert name and address) has been duly elected as member of this organization upon the pledge to do everything possible to increase his or her

¹² “That the first way of Arab immigrants to the United States were in fact Christian and that the Muslims in the United States are between six and eight billion and are from 50 different nations as well as African Americans. Also, the fact that the majority of Muslims in the worlds are South Asian (Indian, Malaysian, Indonesian) with Arabs making up only 12 percent of Muslims worldwide (Shaheen, 2009).”

¹³ Stromberg highlights both well-known and little-known heroes from a wide spectrum of publishers and imprints.

¹⁴ Inconsistencies with moral judgements and major characters can cause backlash within the comic community. For instance, when Superman made the decision to kill General Zod in the 2013 Superman film, *Man of Steel*, caused an uproar among fans. Part of the Superman ethos, is to never take a life, this is what makes him the beacon of hope and justice, and makes his decisions in saving the world, even more challenging.

strength and courage, to aid the cause of justice, to keep absolutely secret the superman code, and to adhere to all the principles of good citizenship.¹⁵

The text above is one of the variations on the Action Comics code for the Supermen of America. By signing their names and sending in the creed, readers were able to become a part of the comic books they were reading and vow to live the morals of their heroes in their everyday life. By negatively stereotyping the Muslim community, comic book writers allow the readership to believe that those in that community emulate the villainous acts represented in the same ways the audience strives to emulate Superman. For this reason, I am not calling for the dismissal of these representations, but instead pushing scholarship on Muslim representation to take the heroic images into account as well. As you will see, the typecasting of Muslim superheroes has its own effect on shaping religious identities for heroic Muslims.

For the purpose of this paper, I explore the qualities embodied by Muslim superheroes and how they present their audience with images of what Muslim religious identity should be. By focusing on heroes, I outline standard archetypes¹⁶ for the Muslims allowed to fight alongside the Hulk and Superman, and wear the hyper-patriotic costume of Captain America. With the introduction of Kamala Khan into the Marvel pantheon, we are presented with a new Muslim hero. Kamala is more culturally accurate, religiously respected, and removed from the images created through Orientalist lenses than any

¹⁵ This creed is highlighted by Grant Morrison in *Supergods*, where he focuses on the power of the god-like nature of the superhero and their power to inspire their readers in a religious way.

¹⁶ Joseph Campbell, in the *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, outlines universal archetypes for the character of the hero and those he interacts with on his journey, although I showcase the archetypes used to represent Muslim heroes, these are not universal. I intend them to only explain representation in American comic books, although I plan to extend this further in later research.

character I have studied. She is also the image being used to confront negative images of American Muslims by those outside of the series, in the real world.

In 1994, Jack Shaheen identified 3 types of Arab comic book villains - “the repulsive terrorist,” “the sinister sheikh,” and “the rapacious bandit.” He notes that finding “good Arab” characters is less likely than seeing a camel pass through the eye of a needle. In his article, his focus on the ways Arabs are portrayed in comics, negates heroes that were existing (although limited) in the period he examines. Extending beyond Arabs, and into those who identify as Muslim, regardless of ethnicity, I have identified three persistent archetypes for Muslim superheroes. If a Muslim is a hero, they are either magical, Black, or the outsider. These types have been constructed by looking at mainstream Muslim heroes both in and out of print. The importance of these archetypes can be fully realized when put into conversation with the *Ms. Marvel* (2014) series. Kamala Khan negates these types and constructs her own. She is not magical, she is not black, and although she addresses issues of cultural differences, she is not separated from her community – with the exception of high school bullying.

METHOD

In order to understand the importance of the creation of *Ms. Marvel* in 2014, it is vital to understand the lineage she was drawn into. The goal of this report to examine the ways Muslim religious identity has been shaped by authors and illustrators in the United States through super hero images. Since I am only engaging American comic books, I have not engaged with the Kuwaiti based Teshkeel Comics series, *The 99*. While these comic books serve as a prime example of Muslim voices creating Muslim heroes, it is not, as of yet, widely circulated in the United States and would not impact the ways comics in the US work to construct the religious identities of Muslims for Americans. I have also chosen to focus on only mainstream heroes. These heroes have to have exist in the main universes¹⁷ of large publishers, been present in multiple issues or debuted in important large audience issues (like the Annual¹⁸), been a part of important teams, or have been created by one of the two largest publishers, Marvel or DC Comics. By only looking at the heroes with the largest audiences, I have excluded characters from *The Losers* (Milestone), *Wise Son* (Milestone), *Gen-13* (Veritgo), and *The Authority* (Milestone), all of which have prominent Muslim characters, but are printed at a lower volume or are meant for a more select and mature audiences.

¹⁷ A universe is the comic book world where all characters exist for publishers. For example, Marvel have its main universe for comic book series and story lines, but it also has continuous storyline in their MCU, the Marvel Cinematic Universe that only exist in film, as well as those created in their imprints, like the Ultimate Universe, which contains the same characters in the main universe but inhabiting a different world and story.

¹⁸ Usually a one-off story marked by a big event, sometimes spanning multiple series consecutively.

I have also not included Muslim characters whose heroic deeds happen out of coincidence and convenience, rather than an urge to do good. The exclusion of these types of heroes was something I contemplated including as the “militant.” These characters with ambiguous morality, have by and large, been government sponsored military forces which somehow do good after doing bad. They also tend to be mercenaries, the very nature of which makes them more anti-heroes than super heroes. With that, I excluded a large all Muslim teams, most notably Desert Sword (Ahmendi, Blue Razzer, Veil, Sirocco) whose journey would be interesting for further study but are too contentious to identify as heroic.

Apart from publishing and moral ambiguity, I used the comic book database, ComicBookReligion.com, reputable comic book forums like ComicVine.com and the online encyclopedias of characters maintained by the publishers. I also cross referenced issues of the series to fact check the religiosity of the character provided by ComicBook Religion, which was correct in all instances.

ComicBookReligion uses a rating system to note whether the religion of the character plays a significant role, is noted, or is not confirmed. The database also includes whether or not their religion is simply assumed because of their nationality. For the purposes of this article, the characters of this study are those whose religious identity has been “confirmed” and is not “incidental” or simply based on their “racial group.” As you will see, the importance of religion for the characters vary, but they have all been identified as Muslim by themselves or have had conversion highlighted in the comics and noted by their creators. I have also not included characters solely based on their nationalist costumes

and personas,¹⁹ although this would allow for the construction of another category, even though the prominence of these heroes is limited to small appearances.

I identify three distinct archetypes for Muslim super heroes. They are magical. Embodying Orientalist imagery of the magical religion and stories of the East. They typically draw their power from magical swords and are placed in opposition to supernatural beings. Muslim superheroes are also Black. In comics, these are the only Muslims who are also American. These Black Muslim characters are more often than not reflections of Malcom X, from their clothing to their names. Finally, heroes who are presented as more developed and driving story arcs²⁰ are never represented as being fully integrated into either the community around them or the superhero teams that should accept them. Although all of these characters are marginalized in one or another, the outsiders are separated from others because distinctive markers of their religious identity usually religious dress or negative stereotypes.

Kamala on the other hand is a new Muslim hero. She is normalized and an in the beginning of an archetype for future characters. Although Islam is represented through her family life, origin story, and costuming, her religious identity does not limit her acceptance by her New Jersey community nor the audience. She doesn't fight demons with magic, and she is unquestionably Pakistani-American. Her story allows Muslim religious identity in and out of comics to be accepted as a part of, and not a part from, American identity. In

¹⁹ Like Batal, *New Warriors* (1995), a Syrian super hero whose outfit is the Syrian flag.

²⁰ Within a series there are multiple story arcs, focusing on different story lines within the same series, for example, in one storyline Superman may fight Lex Luthor and five issues later the new focus is Doomsday.

each of the following chapters, I have also focused on the costumes of the heroes and how it reflects their religion or ideas associated with, as well as their origin stories.

Through costumes, you come understand the identity of the heroes, without understanding their story first. Since comic books are a visual medium, the aesthetics of the costumes need to convey the values, beliefs, and identity of the hero, just as much as their deeds. Richard Reynolds points out that costumes “function as the crucial sign of super-heroism. It marks out heroes from other characters who do not wear costumes (Reynolds, 1994).” Costume choices in visual media often serve as a way to mark religious identity. Depicting religion is easiest through clothing, “especially for those outside the tradition, when that identity is tied to an easily visual index (Davis, Westerfelhaus, 2013).” These characters and types are equally defined by their origin stories and their costumes, to understand their place in the comic book world, these two sections of their identities provide the largest insight.

Origin stories are important to all heroic storylines. For example, if no one has read a Batman comic book or seen one of the many live-action movie, they would more than likely know two things: first, that he is a billionaire, and second, that he fights crime because of he lost his parents were murdered by a criminal. Although they may not be able to tell you the specifics of the latter, they could probably tell you how he came to be. The moment when a person decides to act heroically or how they make the choice to join a team, is the most important part to establishing the super hero within the larger scheme of things. This often comes in their debut issues, but can be revealed later on as part of a greater narrative. Although I have brought subsequent issues of the heroes into the

conversation when necessary, my main focus is to see how they were introduced into their worlds and how they interacted with others already existing in their respective universes. In the origin story, you see what drives the quest to do good.

Chapter One: Magic Muslims

Every superhero is magical. They tend to possess powers inaccessible to those around them. Superman can fly, Captain America doesn't seem to age, and Spider-Man can swing through New York city on webs. When Muslim super-hero characters begin to be introduced in the 1980s²¹, they fall in line with another type of hero. They do not have powers that they were born with and their bodies are not fundamentally changed through accidents or birth, but rather gain their power from objects. In the same way the Green Lantern gains his superpowers from his ring or Doctor Strange from his talismans and spell books, these characters have gained their powers from a magical object. Most importantly, and seemingly the same object, the enchanted scimitar.

Often used as an item possessed by characters from the "Middle East"²². The scimitar is one of the icons associated with Muslims and the Orient. Orientalism as a term has come to be used as a way to exemplify the stereotypes perpetuated in characters produced by "Western" and mostly white authors. The term, as coined by Edward Said in the 1980s was used to explain the ways in which the West created and disseminated images of the East, in order to define itself against the latter. More specifically, Orientalism, as described by Said, is a "manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient (Said, 1981)." In media, this often translates to the production of images and

²¹ I have not taken Golden Age comic characters into account, such as Black Tiger, nor periodicals highlighting the adventures of Sinbad or Alababah.

²² A term I include in quotations since it is more a concept than a geographic location allowing some to be considered Middle Eastern for one person, while being excluded by others.

identities for Muslims in line with the *One Thousand and One Nights* and the lore surrounding the tales. In comics, this is done because the visuals a magic carpet, turban, scimitar and violent and eccentric demons can bring to the story.

For the following two examples of “Magic Muslims,” the Orientalist images I am dealing with have been present in the comic world from comic strips²³ to trade volume²⁴. Instead of highlighting all of those within this category, I have focused on two examples. The first from 1980 by Marvel Comics, and the second created twenty years later by DC Comics in 2000. I chose these two examples because of the assumed differences they should have based on geographic location, gender, and publisher. However, the Magic Muslims represented in comics have very little variation from the Orientalist projections that Said and others point out.

The first of these characters made his debut in a Marvel Comics long standing series. Introduced in *The Incredible Hulk* #257 (Bill Mantlo, 1982) Arabian Knight embodies many of the Orientalist stereotypes of Islam and the Middle, or Mystic East. A character that would be recreated in major animated features like *Aladdin*. A Bedouin leader, Abdul Qamar finds the Hulk’s alter ego Dr. Bruce Banner, dying the desert. After taking him in, and having one of his three wives nurse him back to health, Qamar’s story begins. As an “Arab Chieftain,” Qamar has provided the labor for an archeology expedition in the sands of Egypt to find a lost crypt holding the demons Gog and Magog, which were released by “Pharaoh” to fight the Israelites. Before entering the crypt, it is made clear that

²³ The adventures of Sinbad..

²⁴ A compilation of comic issues into a bound volume – not a graphic novel.

the Egyptian archeologist's intentions are to start a war with Israel, or in his mind, finish it. Qamar points out the peace that the two countries have had and is dismissed. As the demons are awakened, the crypt begins to collapse and Qamar is pushed into a hidden inner tomb. Disoriented, it is here, where Qamar becomes the Arabian Knight.

Upon entering the tomb, he is met with a magic golden scimitar and a red flying carpet. With these two items, he is transformed from a Bedouin chieftain to the embodiment of Orientalism: white turban, golden scimitar, magic carpet, white pants, and a bare chest. With Hulk opening the entrance to crypt, Arabian Knight flies out on his carpet and begins helping the fight against the demons Gog and Magog. The demons note that they will continue their goal to destroy the Israelites²⁵. Ultimately, they are slain by the Hulk and the magical scimitar found by Qamar. His powers, mediated through the scimitar, come from an ancient Muslim magician who vanquished the demons of Moses' era. Qamar continues to slay magical demons summoned by sorcerers (*Marvel Comics Presents #47*, Wolfman, Buschema, et al.; 1990), and is even forced to join an Iraqi mercenary/military group known as Desert Sword. The Arabian Knight is not a unique hero; he is one whose powers are granted through an object and ancestry, leaving the mantle to be taken and reimagined from the 1980s on. After Arabian Knight I's portrayal falls out of favor and he is followed by two more incarnations.

Arabian Knight II, also known as "Muslim Warrior" is not a hero, but he wears the sash, wields the scimitar, and rides the magic carpet in the same way Qadar did. Although

²⁵ A very overt nod to the existing tension between the state of Israel and the "Middle East."

the origins of his magical items have not been expressed beyond the fact that he won them by “trial by combat.” Muslim Warrior is shown violently attempting to take over the country of the super hero Black Panther. As he emerges from the fight, the general²⁶ yells out, “Infidels beware! The Arabian Knight has returned!” With this incarnation, it is explained that Arabian Knight II will be a weapon against the “super-powered enemies of faith.” He is also classified as a “holy warrior” sent to Africa to destroy Black Panther and give the children of Africa someone to aspire to be. He is quickly dispatched by the Black Panther and Storm (*Black Panther #15*, Hudlin, Eaton, et. Al; 2005).

The final incarnation of the Arabian Knight was a Saudi Arabian soldier. Upon the death of Qamar, the Saudi Arabian government came into possession of the magical items, choosing to bestow them upon a special operative, Navid Hashim. introduced in *Union Jack #1* (Gage, Perkins, et al., 2006), he is a different kind of Arabian Knight. Although he still wields the scimitar, his carpet has been made into a telekinetic sash. He is not a leader of a Bedouin tribe, he is military trained and the hero for all of Saudi Arabia. Hashim’s reincarnation of the character was an attempt to correct the overtly Orientalist stylings of Qamar, to remove him from the “Aladdin” lineage and bring him into the modern world. In doing so, the creators (Christos Gage and Mike Perkins) of Arabian Knight III, made a character who embodies the new image of Muslim religious identity, and the East, he is a militant. Although he is a good guy, he is put in direct opposition to Sabra, an Israeli hero, whose original costume with the *New Warriors* was white and blue with a large Star of

²⁶ Illustrated to resemble Saddam Hussein.

David. She questions him on the Saudi Arabian links to terrorism, contesting his place on the team by assuming radical leanings. This is not the first time that Sabra has come into opposition to an Arabian Knight, in the past, Qamar and Sabra were forced to work as a team in order to survive (*Marvel Contest of Champions* #2, Gruenwald, Mantlo, et al., 1982),

Through the Arabian Knight readers are taught two things, the ways in which magic is seemingly tied into the ways Muslims exist, and that there are consistent issues with Israel. In many ways, the religion and the magic of the characters is removed from each other. Arabian Knight's religious identity, although important and noted in his incarnations, are in some ways less important than his part in a magical lineage of warriors. This changes in the next Magical Muslim, Janissary and her religion is focal to her story, but her religion is not presented as something grounded in faith, so much as one grounded in magic, sorcery, and demons.

Introduced in *JLA Annual* #4 (Vaughan, Scott, Collazo, 2000) with the sub headline "Unveiling: The Janissary!," Selma Tolon is the Turkish Muslim hero, Janissary. Although this is probably a nod to the veil worn by Tolon, the only mention to modesty in the issue is when Wonder Woman arrives late to the final battle in a mosque after she tries to be appropriately dressed for the Muslim setting - by putting a hooded cloak of her usual bathing suit-like costume. Beyond the title, Tolon was introduced as part of an attempt to showcase superheroes from around the world, including heroes from India and Mexico in *Batgirl Annual* #1 (Peterson, Scott, Haley, Matt, et al., 2000) and in *Superman Annual* #12 (Pinto, Hoghenbeck, et al., 2000) respectively. In an attempt to diversify the DC universe

as well as the Justice League of America (JLA), DC introduces Tolon as a doctor by day who works through Ramadan and still manages to save the day in Turkey. Although life and culture in Turkey does not mirror Saudi Arabia, Tolon has the same origin story as Qamar.

Tolon is shown wearing a red hard hat with the crescent and star of the Turkish flag and a red jumpsuit as she is trying to free Turkish citizens from the rubble. After an aftershock hits, she falls into a pit and finds the magical scimitar and a spell book in “Ancient Turkish.” Like Arabian Knight’s scimitar, hers is a part a long lineage of Greatness. The scimitar is traced back to Sultan Suleiman the Great, the Sultan credited for much of Ottoman expansion. The spell book, is the Eternity Book of the mythical Wizard Merlin – who for some reason wrote all in “ancient Turkish.” From this point on she dons an all red costume with a veil and the Turkish crescent emblazoned on her chest, she becomes the Janissary. Her introduction in the JLA Annual is focused around Islamic cosmology, or rather, a magical Islamic cosmology. Tolon is called to action when a general looking to cause a military coup and take over Turkey summons the *jinn* Iblis. Iblis is often confused for the embodiment of the Christian Satan, and his presentation in the comic follows suit. He corrects General Kazim when he is addressed as the devil. “I am not a devil...merely an angel with pride.” Although Iblis in Islamic cosmology is not a devil, he is not an angel either. This line evokes the popular idea of the fallen angel Lucifer from Christianity, more than the identity of Iblis from the Qur’an. Aside from comments made by characters, Iblis correctly identifies himself as a *jinn* who chose to be defiant, to

not bow to men after their creation²⁷. Iblis, as a part of the concept of *shaytan*²⁸, is understood in Islam, although it is not assumed that he is the only actor.

In the Islamic cosmology, God created Humans of clay²⁹, Angels of light³⁰, and Jinn of fire³¹. The *jinn* are not angels and the angels are not *jinn*. The Satanic symbolism continues in the illustration of General Kazim in a summoning circle of candles with a pentagram drawn beneath him – often associated with Satanism. Kazim and Iblis both identify Tolon as a sorceress. Iblis enters the General's body while he attempts to find the "great sorceress," and raises the dead armies of the Ottoman Empire in hopes to take over all of Turkey. Because of the scale of the chaos, the Justice League of America is drawn into the fight. J'onn Jones, the Martian Manhunter, describes Tolon's strength and super heroic qualities, he says that she is a strong national hero, whose love for country makes up for her lack of experience.

Her alias, Janissary, is taken from Turkish history. When the JLA meets Janissary and watch her slaying the undead, Wonder Woman comments that her name is to be respected, after Hal Jordan (The Green Lantern) jokingly calls her "the January." "The Janissary, Green Lantern. It's an ancient word used to describe only a country's most loyal

²⁷ Qur'an 17:61 -- And [mention] when We said to the angles, "Prostrate to Adam," and they prostrated, except for Iblis. He said, "Should I prostrate to one You created from clay?" (Sahih International translation)

²⁸ A concept which many Western audiences interpret as Satan instead of an unbounded negative force with many actors on its behalf not a single actor.

²⁹ Qur'an 23:12 -- And certainly did We create man from an extract of clay. (Sahih International translation)

³⁰ Sahih Muslim Book 042, Hadith Number 7134 -- As 'Aishah (may Allah be pleased with her) reported: "The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: 'The angels are created from light, just as the jinn are created from smokeless fire and mankind is created from what you have been told about.'"

³¹ Qur'an 15:27 -- And the jinn We created before from scorching fire.

of soldiers.” While Janissaries were indeed soldiers, they were a specific class of soldier, not named for their loyalty or existing in countries other than Turkey. The word Janissary is not in fact an ancient word, but rather the name for the group of soldiers in the 15th and into the 19th century. They began their training as Christian youth brought in from the Balkans and converted to Islam. The janissaries, although an elite military unit, were not always loyal to the Ottoman Empire. They “frequently engineered palace coups in the 17th and 18th centuries”, and in their last revolt in the 19th century under Mahmud II were killed in the Auspicious Incident.

On the last page of the comic, the authors include information on the “Republic of Turkey.” They explain that the janissaries were an elite unit made of “war captives and Christian youth,” who had the power to “make and unmake sultans.” The author also explains their greatness came to an end when Mahmud II “slaughtered them in their barracks.” Although this is not wrong, it is also not right. The janissaries were powerful, and they routinely utilized their power to cause political upsets which eventually led to their deaths. The history that is presented by Wonder Woman and the author, are written from Orientalist standpoint. They present them as the epitome of loyalty and training and do so in order to create Janissary as a hero from long lineage of heroes.

In the final scenes of the story, Tolon comes face to face with Iblis, not initially knowing that he was existing inside General Kazim’s body. She confronts who she believes to be the General with anger, “You are a disgrace to the Muslim faith and your country Kazim.” After it is revealed he is really Iblis, Tolon realizes that the only way to end the magic being used by Iblis to summon the dead and overthrow the Turkish government is

to allow Iblis to enter her. She agrees to be possessed by the jinn and although she struggles with him in the beginning, she defeats him in one simple motion: prostration. Throwing her body to the floor in prayer, Tolon is able to expel Iblis and save the day. Through her prayer, she forces humility before God upon the jinn who refused to bow because of his pride.

Although the entirety of the story is focused on Islamic cosmology, it is not religious. With the exception except for in Tolon's act of humility to God. The story is focused on magic, demon conjuring and the summoning of the dead. Tolon's identity as a sorceress is different than the Arabian Knight who was just in possession of magical items, Tolon harness that magic. The religious stories of angels, jinn, and humans are made in magical tales, the religion is removed from it.

The Muslim characters represented in this section are faithful, but only inasmuch as they fit into the magical elements of their cosmology or their nationality. They identify as Muslims and their faith is not assumed, however, at 20 years apart, they both employ Orientalist images. In the *Captain Britain* series, another female Muslim makes her debut. Faiza Hussain, also known as Excalibur, is also magical. Hailed by Stromberg for being a fully developed Muslim character in the 15 issue run of *Captain Britain and the MI:13*. Hussain functions as the eyes through which the series is experienced and her "religious beliefs are only one aspect of a more complex personality." Like Arabian Knight and Janissary before her, Hussain embodies a mythology attached to her weapon. However, it is not an Orientalist representation of Islam, rather, she fits into the long established myth

of King Arthur and Excalibur. As the wielder of Excalibur, Hussain is worthy enough to fight with the weapon of kings.

Hussain veils in everyday life and is often depicted in her white coat, like Tolon, she is a young doctor. Her costume is an extension of this identity, but is not Muslim. She wears a modern take on Knight's armor with the coat of arms of Essex and the hood works to keep her veiled while still allowing the nature of the costume to be undisturbed. Where Hussain diverges from Arabian Knight and Janissary is that her costume is not the embodiment of Orientalist Muslim identities, but rather symbolic of her being both a Muslim and an integral part of British society (Stromberg, 2011). Although Hussain is still the bearer of a mythical sword, it is *the* sword of Britain. Her story however comes to a close in the last issue of *Captain Britain* and she has been introduced in other series. Her inclusion in this section is to show the ways in which magical Muslims exist even as authors move away from Orientalist images. It is important to note, as well, that Captain Britain and Excalibur were created by British writer Paul Cornell and was written into the fabric of British society.

Her creation was also done while acknowledging the ways characters like Arabian Knight and Janissary were tokens for the worlds in which they inhabited, in fact, where Janissary is meant to carry the banner for Turkish Muslims, Cornell explains that with Hussain's creation she would not be the "standard bearer for a whole community (qtd. In Richards)." Her magical qualities in fact, compliment her everyday life. Excalibur allows Hussain to heal and create barriers, reminiscent of her daily life as a doctor.

For Muslim characters, their religious identity has been okayed for heroic displayed when it is categorized as magic and not religious observance. They are heroes because of the items they channel and the lineage those swords come from, not because of their faith. Their religion is incidental in the case of Janissary overtly exoticized. They fight demons, become sorcerers, and practice magic instead of their religion.

Chapter Two: Black Muslims

Since Malcolm X's conversion to Islam in the 1960s and the conversion of other notable public figures like Muhammad Ali and the proliferation of Islam in hip-hop made by Black Muslims like the Wu-Tang Clan, images of Black Islam have thrived in popular culture³². In comics, the only way to be an American Muslim character is to be a Black Muslim, and more importantly, a Black Muslim man. From names like Muhammad X, and Josiah X, to black berets and skullcaps, these characters embody what is popularized about Black Islam, and more importantly the Nation of Islam in US.

Josiah al-Hajj Saddiq, or more commonly known as Josiah X and the "Black Captain America," is the best illustration of this trope. Appearing in the 7 issue series, *The Crew*, from 2003-2004, Josiah X is a Marvel Comics character living and attempting to help his area of the city, known as Little Mogadishu (or the Mog). He is the son of one of the black super-soldiers created through the same Program that produced Captain America. Only, unlike the blonde haired, blue eyed, Steve Rogers, Josiah's father and the other black test subjects were neglected and allowed to deteriorate. Josiah, was an experiment of breeding the super-soldier serum into a new generation. As a child, he is left at a Catholic orphanage as an attempt to hide him from the people that created him.

A child of the 60s, Josiah attempts to run away from his orphanage after reading about the assassination of the "former minister for the Nation of Islam, Al-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, better known as Malcolm X." His origin moves from his service in Vietnam, to

³² And accepted as a practice of Islam although the universal Muslim community often excludes them from affiliation with Islam.

his incarceration for assaulting a white officer, to his Black Nationalist involvement in the 1970s, and finally to his life as Minister X. It is the latter which dons the red, white and blue suit, usually reserved for Captain America. In his final transformation he explains that he has completed the Hajj, and learned the love and truth of Islam. He is now Josiah al-Hajj Saddiq.

In many ways, Josiah's Muslim identity is also his identity as a black man, and more importantly as an American. Through his name, he is attached to very American form of Islam, tied into ideas of race and social justice. Although *The Crew* was cancelled after seven issues, and the story arch was never fleshed out much beyond character origin stories, I see Josiah's existence as a Captain America-figure telling. He is in many ways among the first American Muslim a super-hero, even if his story was never fully told. Josiah's story also differs from other characterizations of Muslims. *The Crew* was written by Christopher Priest and Joe Bennet, both non-Muslims themselves but African American and Brazilian, respectively; they still present different voices than the typically all white creative teams who traditionally use Muslim characters in their stories. One way that Josiah's story differs is because he does not have exchanges with Muslim characters of other ethnicities. In addition to Josiah X, G.W. Bridge is also an American Muslim character.

Where Josiah's Islam (insisting he be addressed as Minister X while out of costume) is present from his first entrance in *The Crew*, Bridge's conversion takes place in 2007, 16 years after debuting in the *X-Force* series in 1991. In *Punisher War Journal Vol 2*, he is shown prostrating in prayer on full-page spreads. Outside of these panels, however,

he is not illustrated practicing Islam. Also, Bridge, is not represented wearing identifying markers of his faith. He does not change his name like Josiah, he does not go on Hajj, and his religion seems personalized. His faith is displayed or overtly shared with the members of his team. As Fredrik Stromberg notes in his article, “*Yo rag-head!*”: *Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books after 9/11*, Bridge’s conversion to Islam is an attempt to create a more familiar representation of a Muslim character by steering away from stereotypes that pander to the image of Muslims as the foreign Other (Stromberg, 2011). In other words, black Muslims are familiar characters, they are American. They fit into the fabric of society in ways that Muslims of other ethnicities are not allowed to. Comic books serve as a window in the culture from which they arise³³. With the high profile nature of the Nation of Islam throughout the Civil Rights Movement, images of black Muslims in media have not been represented as being foreign nor out of place. These characters and others like them³⁴ show that their religious identity as Muslims is strongly tied to their racial identity, specifically by marking the visually with cues strongly tied to black nationalist movements.

At a roundtable discussion, *Punisher War Journal* writer, Matt Fraction, explains that Bridge’s identity as both Muslim and super-hero are very connected by the fact that he is a black Muslim. “I love the idea of there being a respectable African-American Muslim, and that he’s a good guy.” This connection between Black Islam and a “good” Muslim

³³ In *Monstrous Bodies*, Miri Nakamura looks at works of Japanese fiction to reconstruct the cultural realities of the time period.

³⁴ Through my research I found that the majority of Muslim heroes were Black and identified as member of the Nation of Islam, although they tended to be published by imprints and not mainstream publishers.

differentiates Bridge from Muslims of other races and ethnicities. This is very apparent in scenes where he is placed in country with a strong history of Islam.

In his article, Stromberg has paid close attention to the scene in question. In the same trade volume mentioned above, Bridge is shown attempting to save a woman of being chased by men in fezzes³⁵. In addition to the stereotypical fezzes and white suits, the street Bridge races down is filled with, what the audience is supposed recognize as Muslim women. All of the women in the scene are veiled with full *burqa*. This representation is not only a generalization of Muslim women, but a cultural inaccuracy as well. Turkey has tried to establish itself as a secular nation, and as such, there have been various laws and regulations against veiling (Ozalgda, 1998). Stromberg's analysis of this oversight, explains that it can be interpreted in three ways: (1) that the author is not "knowledgeable about the history and politics of the country he writes about/draws, (2) wants to make a statement without regard for the accuracy about Muslim countries and their treatment of women, (3) or simply uses the iconic image of the *burqa* as a short-hand sign for signifying Muslim women (Stromberg, 2011)." Although I do not disagree with any of these reasons, I believe that this scene has a fourth purpose. The difference between Bridge and his surroundings establishes him as a Muslim set apart from the generalizations of practitioners abroad. This distinction between Black Islam and Islam as it is experienced in foreign countries can be seen with the more diverse reconstruction of the DC Universe, classified as The New 52³⁶.

³⁵ There has been a ban on the fez in Turkey.

³⁶ New 52 characters tend to have different races and ethnicities, genders, or sexual orientations – ex. Wally West, The Flash, is reimagined as a black teenager instead of a red headed speedster from the old universe.

In 2013, DC Comics debuted Simon Baz on Free Comic Book day (*The New 52 Free Comic Book Day Special Edition #1*, 2013), an annual celebration of comic books and comic culture where most companies create special issues to be handed out at comic book shops across the country. Simon Baz is the first Arab-American Muslim to be attached to a major series. He was created to join the ongoing and well-known series, *The Green Lantern*. Baz is self-identified as a Lebanese-American who came to the country as a child (*The Green Lantern: Rise of the Third Army*, 2013). However, when looking at an image of Baz next to the black Green Lantern, John Stewart, the similarities are uncanny. Phenotypically, Baz is illustrated to represent the characters like Stewart, not the population of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan). To be clear, I understand that the “look” of a character does not define their race nor their religion. With Fractions words in mind, it is clear that familiar representations are in fact black representations. Although in the few panels depicting Baz in childhood, his skin is more directly related to the way people of “Middle Eastern” or South Asian descent are represented in comic, it darkens as his age progresses. And although his skin and body type is a reflection of John Stewart’s it becomes even more noticeable DC action figures.

His inclusion in this section is done to point out a key feature of the American Muslims typically represented in comic books. To be an American Muslim superhero, the visual characteristics of the character are black. Although Baz’ origin will be discussed in the next section, his visual identity is important to note. It was upon seeing a side by side of image of Baz and Stewart, that the idea that American Islam is Black Islam, became cemented. In the final issue of *The Crew*, the important role that race plays in American

Muslim identity is displayed. In this image Josiah X is shown holding a flag in the costume of Captain America. He is the “black Captain America.” It is not pointed out, that he is, in fact, the Muslim Captain America. On the cover of *Superman #176*, a novel character Muhammad X³⁷ is featured, fist proudly displayed, black leather jacket and small round glasses completing the nods to the people who inspired again. Again, the fact that Muhammad X is Muslim is not focused on. In this issue, Superman speaks with the Martian Manhunter about the importance of presenting role models that look like the kids they wish to inspire. In this conversation, it is Muhammad X’s race that is noted as important and not his religion.

Whether their faith is an overt nod to the Nation of Islam or only expressed in one panel an issue, these African American superheroes have been the only way to represent American Muslims in comic books. In many ways, their religious identities are second to their racial identities in these issues.

³⁷ A name that the character notes is take from his two heroes: The Prophet Muhammad and Malcom X.

Chapter Three: Outsider Muslims

In comics, the need to make heroes and heroines fall outside public opinion in their worlds is almost necessary³⁸. For Marvel's *X-Men*, their status as outsiders in society provided their story depth. They are mutants hated by the world but at the same time, they are tasked with saving. However, by functioning as a team, their outsider status is off-set by the acceptance they experience while in their mutant community. Although the classic super hero narrative includes the hero feeling isolated within the larger context, they often have a sense of belonging in the teams they are invited to join or a character that remains by their side³⁹. For the mutants in the Marvel universe, they find solace by joining the X-Men, and for heroes of the DC universe, they often find acceptance by being offered membership into the Justice League. For Muslim characters however, they are always aware that their culture, dress, and stereotypes associated with their religion bar them complete acceptance by their team.

In *New X-Men #133* (2002), Marvel introduced a new member of the *X-Men* family. With 882 appearances in issues to date (ComicVine.com) and a two animated appearances in the short-lived television show, *Wolverine and the X-Men*, Sooraya Qadir was the most prominent Muslim character. She has been praised for presenting audiences with a positive representation of Muslims and Muslim women in particular. Although she should be celebrated, it is necessary to note that she has also not been allowed to achieve complete

³⁸ Captain America is man removed from his natural time period, Superman is an alien being from the planet Krypton sent to Earth, Spiderman was a bullied teenager, etc.

³⁹ Batman, dark and isolated, has always had Alfred and various Robins.

acceptance within her team. In fact, when there are explanations of her religious identity, it is when she is asked to explain herself and her actions. Created by Grant Morrison, Qadir is from Western Afghanistan, devout, and often depicted as being the most morally troubled by having to fight. She is also consistently coming into contact with, and fighting against, extremism (both Muslim and mutant). Although Qadir is represented as a capable female hero, she is still a problematic character.

Like most superheroes, Qadir is not identified by her name when in the field among non-X-Men. Her code-name is Dust. The meaning of her name is two-fold. The first use of her name, is as a reference to her mutant power (transforming her body into sand). A Muslim turning into sand and always being represented as being a part of the desert, is hardly new. This power is taken immediately from the notion that Muslims live in deserts, away from life and city. In fact, the ability to change the body into another form to either strip the skin from their enemies or suffocate them have been exemplified by the heroes Sandstorm (*Green Lantern Vol 4 #14*) and Veil (*New Mutants Annual #7*) prior to the creation of Dust.

The second reason for her name is her first language. Dust speaks Arabic. In her emergence at the end of the comic, after being saved from Afghani slave-traders by Wolverine, she speaks one word: *turaab* - “dust” in Arabic (*New X-Men #133*, 2002). In the same way that assuming Muslims are from the desert, the use of Arabic as the first language of this character is problematic. As an Afghani citizen, Dust could have spoken a number of languages. The official languages of her home country are Dari (Afghan Persian), Pashto, with a mixture of other Turkic languages. There are also 30 minor

languages (primarily Balochi and Pashai). However, in this eclectic mix, Arabic falls is listed with the 29 other minor languages that make up only 4% combined of the spoken languages in Afghanistan (*World Factbook*). In her language, Morrison neglects the fact that although the Qur'an is written in Arabic, Muslims do not always speak this language. In the same way Fraction and his illustrative team depicted Turkish women in *burqas*, the lack of understanding towards the cultural expressions of Islam is glaring.

Perhaps the most apparent marker of her Muslim identity and the overlooking of cultural nuances is her style of dress. Dust chooses to veil. A choice she makes clear in her numerous encounters with other mutants, particularly her roommate Noriko "Nori" Ashida. These two women are often put in direct opposition to each other. One is secular and comfortable wearing skin revealing clothes, and the other finds comfort in her modesty. The most common of which is Ashida making a references to Qadir's "oppression" as a woman who veils. The focus on Qadir's veiling practice is repeat amongst other characters as well. Most notably in a scene with her mother. After being separated from her mother for years as a slave, she finally has a meeting with her. Here, Qadir's mother questions why her daughter still veils, in a country where she has that choice. Qadir reveals that she was never forced to veil because of the Taliban, but instead chose to wear the "*burqa*" because of the comfort she felt and the freedom it provided her "in the eyes of men (*New X-Men: Hellions* #2, 2005)". Even though the creators of Dust work to establish a different conversation around the practice of veiling, by showing a woman who has made the choice and not been forced into modesty, there are still problems. The first of these issues is the

terminology used to describe her clothing and the second is the barrier it creates between her and her team.

The burqa is most commonly associated with Afghanistan and is often a blue or purple color. This style of veiling is described as a single piece of fabric with netted cloth covering the eyes. Qadir does not wear a *burqa*. She is illustrated with a black dress and face covering which leaves her eyes exposed. This is known as an *abaya* with a *niqab* veil. This style is often the one depicted in popular culture and is most commonly worn in the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf. The illustrators fail to realize that veiling, although it is a religious practice, is defined differently across the different ethnicities and nationalities of practicing Muslims. For example, women in gulf states wear the *abaya* and *niqab*, leaving just their eyes exposed, whereas women in Pakistan traditionally wear a long scarf called a *dupatta*, with the two ends swooped around their necks and left hanging, only covering their hair at appropriate times. The term *hijab*, may be used to describe the general practice of veiling by Muslim women, and by describing the practice by other terms establishes the style of veiling being employed.

Although the creators may have initially been ignorant of cultural difference in the way women veil, it is directly addressed by another character. Nehnzo explains to Pixie, both fellow mutants in the Academy, that Dust is not wearing a *burqa*. He explains this to her while the three of them wait in the infirmary and she asks why Qadir still veils even though she is pretty. Nehnzo says that it is not a *burqa* but rather an “abaya with a niqab veil.” He then explains that Pixie should respect Dust by learning about her culture (*New X-Men #42*, 2004). After this, characters, including Dust, remain addressing her veil as

burqa. The overt message of suggesting the other characters learn more about Dust is ironic, since the writers and illustrators seem to have not given her Afghani culture the attention it deserves.

Dust's clothing serves as an "obvious outward expression of her religious faith, in both her superhero and 'secret' identities (Davis, Westerfelhaus; 2013)." Although her costume has been called "exceptional" it used to constantly separate her from the community around her. In fact, if someone unexposed to Islam were to read the issues where Dust is confronted about her veiling or explains modesty, it would be assumed that Muslim women should veil and in addition to this, exclude themselves from "mixed company." The depiction of modesty in the stories, although it may not be negative, serves to consistently alienating Dust, and resigning her to the margins of campus life at the Xavier Institute, which she calls home. As noted above, she has defending her choice of veiling multiple times across various series in which she appears. She has also noted that her commitment to modesty has shaped mundane tasks and her interaction with fellow students (Davis, Westerfelhaus; 2010). For example, she explains to Nori that she does not "eat in mixed company" because it requires her to remove her "hood." She also explains that she does not speak with men alone because it is not her "custom (*Young X-Men Academy X #5*, 2004)." While the authors should be praised for creating a visibly Muslim character who is also the member of an established heroic team, it is important to understand that the creators have also left her in the margins of this team.

Her religious identity is one that keeps her from interacting with her team, and as readers follow her story and learn about her "customs" they see Islam as something that

calls for a level of devotion which interferes with daily life and forces a choice for the believer between participation in social environments or religious devotion.

When we look at her actions, her religious identity remains clearly marked as well. Dust is most commonly depicted in prayer. She is not only shown praying the required five times a day, but is often shown praying after a battle or altercation in which she had to harm villains, morally torn about the use of violence. These villains have been of varying types. However, when she is the focus of the story arch, she is fighting against extremists. She is shown fighting violent Muslims such as the Taliban or members of fictional terrorist organizations. On her first day attending classes she, the teacher attempts to have her leave her faith and fight for mutant superiority. Being singled out, Dust rejects the disguised Magneto, but her rejection of the extreme and violence is something that she must reject countless times, a challenge not every mutant hero faces.

Although Simon Baz, a Muslim man, does not wear markers of his faith like Dust, he deals with a different set of issues that leave him on the margins of society. Baz is a Lebanese-American growing up in Dearborn, Michigan, and serves as the first and only Arab-American superhero. Although this is not terribly original, it does fit with the majority Arab Muslim population of the city. A troubled youth, Baz stole and raced cars through the city and it is to be assumed that his troubled past is the result of consistently being marginalized. The opening scene of his debut issue is a family sitting on a couch, a light illuminating the room, the illustrator (Doug Mahnke) then focuses in on the eyes on the eyes of the son. Reflected in his pupil is the devastation of September 11th, 2001. In the subsequent pages you see Baz protecting his sister who is being bullied for wearing a veil

and an image of him during a security screening in an airport (*The Green Lantern: Rise of the Third Army*, 2013).

As his story continues in the *Green Lantern: The End*, it is made clear that his morality is ambiguous to those around him. A street racer and car thief, Baz makes the mistake of stealing a van with a bomb and as he drives it away from populated areas and jumps from the driver's seat, it explodes. Immediately, he is captured by authorities and brought in for questioning. Although the circumstance of the bomb seems like a terrorist plot, rather than happenstance, Baz' interrogation highlights the assumptions of Muslims in the United States living in a post 9/11 society. The line of question belittles Baz' assertion that he was not responsible for the bomb, just the theft. He clarifies that the theft was in order to support his sister and her son. He then asserts in a single panel, "I am a car thief, not a terrorist." Shortly after this, it is revealed that Baz is about to be tortured. Before the authorities begin their new line of "questioning" Baz is saved by a Green Lantern ring⁴⁰.

When Green Lanterns have been chosen in the past⁴¹ the ring has sought out wearers who possessed heroic personalities. In a scene following his escape, Amanda Waller⁴² is shown explaining the situation of a "suspected terrorist" being in possession of a Green Lantern to the president of the United States. In this situation they seem to be baffled as to why he has been chosen. He's a noted car thief. What heroic character does he have? This disbelief of Baz' ability to be a Green Lantern is heightened when the Justice

⁴⁰ The ring is the source of a power for those chosen by the Green Lantern Corps, is an intergalactic military/police force that chooses two representatives from every sector (although Earth has 4) of the universe (as exists in DC comics) to help keep peace and order.

⁴¹ Hal Jordan, John Stewart, Guy Gardener, Kyle Rayner.

⁴² In charge of the JLA along with other organizations of super humans.

League attempt to apprehend him. Although it was not his intention to fight back, the ring fought for him. Deepening the belief that Baz is indeed someone undeserving and unheroic. It is later explained that the ring he received contained both the ring of Hal Jordan, the first Green Lantern⁴³, and one of the biggest villains, Sinestro. In fact, the ring sent to Baz was sent to seek out both a hero and a villain.

Baz' story is one that puts him on the outside of all groups that should accept him. His status as a suspected terrorist puts him outside American culture as a whole, and even in his exoneration, the evidence that he was not the mastermind behind the bomb is wiped out. This status also puts his possession of the power ring, and in this way his status as a member of the super-hero pantheon in question. Even among the Green Lanterns themselves, there is fear that he was chosen from Sinestro's need for power and not Jordan's impulse for good. Baz is not accepted. This status remains for two whole volumes.

Unlike Dust, Baz does eventually come to be accepted as a superhero within the Corps and in the future⁴⁴ is entrusted to train the first female Green Lantern of Earth. It is also important to note that he is asked to join Justice League and his name is publically cleared of any terrorist connection. While the portrayal of Baz as experiences the very real climate of a post 9/11 America, his story is grounded firmly in his status as a marginalized American. And although the end of his story arc has his innocence proclaimed and his status as the future of the Corps, there isn't much being done with his character to date to explain his acceptance into both groups. His role is fairly insignificant.

⁴³ The first once the Corps was created in the Silver Age (1959).

⁴⁴ A story line yet to be told.

What these characters show us, is that even when a Muslim is a hero, they are never fully integrated into their surroundings. They are questioned about their motives, their faith and have one foot on the outside of their respective teams. For the audiences of these comics, the lesson learned is that even in heroism, Muslims will never be fully integrated into society, and it is their religious devotion and identity that separates them from the people around them.

Chapter Four: The New Muslim Hero

All of the characters explained above, and those that fell out of the scope of this report, not a single author or illustrator involved with their creation is Muslim. The types of Muslims chosen to be heroes are entirely constructed by those outside of the Muslim community. While these characters are meant to represent the ability of Muslims to be characterized as those doing the saving, as opposed those the audience needs saving from, they do more to exoticize Muslims in the United States, racialize those who are accepted, and ultimately keep Muslims on the outside of American society. The new Ms. Marvel, does not fit into any of these archetypes and she has been more successful than all of them. In fact, her story confronts all of these the issues raised by those before her and turns them on their heads.

Written by G. Willow Wilson, a Muslim woman, and edited by Sana Amanat, a Pakistani-American, the reboot of the *Ms. Marvel* series is centered around the adventures and daily life of Kamala Khan, a Pakistani American teenager living in New Jersey. This series marks the transfer of the Ms. Marvel title from Carol Danvers, blond haired and blue eyed all-American girl, to Kamala. Unlike the heroes before her, she is the headliner. She isn't a part of a team and isn't introduced to help an existing icon. Instead, her struggle is her own, and the writers ensure that her individuality among the pantheon of Marvel characters is known from the beginning. Kamala's story does not come from Scheherazade's tales, nor does it emerge as a mirror image of a prominent Muslim figure. Her background and family life is closely taken from Amanat's own experiences, and

Wilson's life as a Muslim woman in the US, married to an Egyptian-American, and raising two daughters as Muslims, allowed them to create a fully developed character.

Kamala gains her powers in the same way many superheroes do, an accident. Her accident does not involve falling into an ancient chamber or by entering a crypt. Instead she is turned super by being an average teenager. In the first volume (*Ms. Marvel: No Normal*, 2014), Kamala does what any 15-year old does, she sneaks out of the house to go to a party. While leaving the party after realizing she it wasn't all she thought it would be, Kamala is stunned and incapacitated by a cloud of gas. This gas cloud, known as Terrigen Mist, awakens her dormant powers⁴⁵. Although this establishes her as an Inhuman, an established type of super-hero with their own comic series and groups, she is only guided by their leader, Medusa, and not added to the roster of grouped Inhumans. Her inclusion in the Inhumans, ties her into a lineage of power, but she is not tied to it in the same way Arabian Knight and Janissary are tied to theirs. The term Inhuman can be seen as removing her common humanity by some but I do not believe that this is the case. Inhumans have been gaining ground in the television universe with *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (ABC, 2013). In a similar way as the X-Men, the Inhumans explore the ways people deal with becoming different and ultimately triumph.

Kamala is a polymorph, a power which allows her to manipulate her body, and change her entire appearance. This ability allows the writer to explore issues of cultural difference and the angst of teenage life. Kamala's issues of difference arrive when she is

⁴⁵ Establishing her as descendent from the Kree, an alien race, whose powers are passed down through the generations and awakened through exposure to Terrigen Mist.

confronted by the resident mean girl, Zoe. In the first few pages you see how she has to deal with the differences between her and those around her. The issue of the veil is raised in a way similar to Dust. While waiting in Circle Q, the corner store where her best friend Bruno works and she longingly looks at pork hot-dogs that she knows that she won't eat, her Turkish-American friend Nakia faces a question about her veil. Just as Nori approached Dust about her reason for veiling, Zoe insinuates that the veil is compelled rather than chosen. The difference between Nakia's veil and Dust's is that she embraces *hijabi* fashion, always depicted in complimenting *hijab* and clothing, always fashionable and put together.

Zoe: Your head scarf is so *pretty* Kiki. I love that color.

Nakia: It's Nakia.

Zoe: But I mean...No one *pressured* you to start wearing it right? Your Father or somebody? Nobody is going to like, *honor kill* you? I'm just *concerned*.

Nakia: Actually, my dad wants me to take it off. He thinks it's a *phase*.

Zoe: Really? Wow, cultures are so *interesting*.

As a *hijabi* herself, it is clear that Wilson wrote this exchange with the common questions in mind. After this exchange, Kamala is unsettled, not by the assumptions that Zoe made about Nakia, but by the ways in which she and Nakia are different from Zoe. Unlike Baz' and Dust's narratives, Kamala's is directly involved with this question of difference and acceptance.

In the first scene after she is granted her powers, the full page panel depicts Iron Man, Captain America and Carol Danvers singing an Urdu folk song. Unlike the use of language by Dust, Urdu is the language of Pakistan. And although Kamala is never shown speaking in only Urdu, she is often shown mixing English and Urdu or responding to her

parents after they speak to her in their language. The child of immigrants, her language usage is accurate. However, when her heroes appear to her speaking the language of her parents, she is startled. They respond with “We are *faith*. We speak all languages of beauty and hardship.” She then enters into an exchange with Captain America (as Faith) and he explains the difficulty that she is going through: “You thought that if you disobeyed your parents -- your culture -- your religion -- your classmates would *accept* you. What happened instead?” She then replies, “They *laughed* at me.” In these pages, in this dream sequence Wilson paints the picture of a girl out of place, struggling to belong. She explains that she only tried to fit in because she was born in “Jersey City and not Karachi.” In the next panel, she explains, that she doesn’t know what she is supposed to be and for that matter, who she is supposed to be. When Faith asks her who she wants to be she replies, “I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and less complicated. I want to be you (referencing Carol Danvers, Ms. Marvel).”

Wilson confronts the ways in which Muslim youth are marginalized in their surroundings. The struggle Kamala faces is one she believes is solved when she changes her appearance to a shorter, younger, Carol. Blonde hair, fair skin, revealing costume and “big boots (see figure 9),” she soon realizes that this bodily change happens, initially when she feels uncomfortable or scared. In the next scene, Kamala hears Zoe’s voice and she shrinks. Although she wants to remain out of sight from the mean girl, circumstances force her to reveal herself. Although the terrigen mist physically transforms her, her step towards heroism happens when she is inspired to save Zoe from drowning. Instead of imaging superheroes talking to her again, Kamala gains her strength from her religious identity.

Where Dust prays and recites the Qur'an when she is troubled by some deed, Kamala turns to scripture to inspire action:

There's this Ayah in the ***Quran*** that my dad always quotes when he sees something ***bad*** on TV. A Fire or flood or a bombing. 'Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all mankind. And whoever ***saves*** one person, it is as if he has ***saved all mankind***. When I was a little kid, that always made me feel better. Because no matter how bad things get, there are always people who rush in to ***help***. And according to my dad, they are ***blessed***.

Where other characters religious identity is apparent, it is never the driving force behind their actions. Arabian Knight does not save the Hulk from a place of religiosity, Josiah X does not want to save the Mog because he is Muslim, Dust does not choose to fight because her religion calls for it, in fact she laments her strength through prayer, and being a Muslim does not allow the ring to empower Baz in a different way than Stewart. It is firmly established that her calling to save lives comes from her religion. She and therefore Muslims, embody a religious identity that calls for them to take action when bad things happen and save those who cannot save themselves. Muslims do not destroy life.

For the next few issues, Kamala struggles to control her powers and come to terms with her identity. It is only after she is gravely injured and her best friend Bruno finds out about her attempt to be a hero, that she realizes that she is stronger when her power comes from herself and is not strained maintaining the guise of the old Ms. Marvel. Although the opening scenes of the comic stress her difference from those like Zoe, the acceptance she feels while with Bruno and later Nakia (*Ms. Marvel Vol 5*, 2015) that eases her feelings of being ostracized and allows her story to move past what makes her different. Through

discussions with Bruno and a final exchange with her worried father, Kamala addresses her role:

Perfect just the way I am. I *hope* so...Abu is right. Bruno was right. I'm not here to be a watered down version of some *other* hero. I'm here to be the best version of *Kamala*.

This is a nod to those who came before, Josiah X, Simon Baz, both characters picking up mantles and either being canceled after being characterized as the “Black Captain America,” or being referred to as the “Muslim Green Lantern.” While Kamala may be described as the “Muslim Ms. Marvel,” her story does not hinge on this. She is developed as a solo-character, informed by the roles of others but not beholden to their paths nor their identities. She is not watered down, and she is most certainly not created to be a token display of difference.

In some of the characters described above, I have heavily focused on costuming. This is because it serves to mark the characters as distinctively different than those around them. Arabian Knight is made to mimic the Orientalist images of the East, Janissary is a prod Turkish citizen, and Dust is a Muslim woman. These are all overt examples of costuming that tell the reader something about the heroes’ identities by relying on stock images of Muslims. For Kamala, this does not happen. She is depicted veiling when culturally appropriate – in the mosques – and although she is always dressed modestly it does not interfere with her life like the “*burqa*” worn by Dust. Her go-to outfits out of costume are tights with a skirt over it, t-shirt, and a hoodie. Her modesty is never a point of contention like Dust’s and the only mention of veiling, in five volumes, comes in the inaugural issue. Her costume itself is culturally specific without being culturally explicit.

She wears tights, a long shirt, and a red sash draped around her neck. This sash is the very same *dupatta* she can be seen wearing in her local mosque during prayer. It flows behind like a cape, and for those not familiar with the customs of veiling in South Asia, it is easily missed.

Kamala is an American Muslim. She is not black and she is not depicted as such. She is a teenager obsessed with videogames and junk food, who when the time calls for it becomes a hero. She neither magical nor marginal and in later issues she is never depicted as being set apart from the society she saves. Although Wilson does make sure to depict cultural concerns such as boys, the situations are handled in a way that has explanation and nuance. Her devout Salafi brother, although initially one-dimensional, is developed beyond his *kufi*.

What *Ms. Marvel* does for the religious identity of Muslims in the United States is simple. This comic book presents its reader a depiction of a Muslim girl that counteracts the existing representations. She proves that American Muslims can be depicted as South Asian and be just as familiar as a Black Muslim man. Her first-generation status notes her difference, but her experiences at school and in her personal life highlights that she is not so foreign after all. Her best friend is an Italian American, and in the most recent volumes their attraction to each other begins to be explored. She is also not exotic. Although she speaks a foreign language, she routinely mixes it with English. Also, the Qur'an is used as a way to give the reader insight to her need to be a hero, not a source for vanquishing demons. Overall, Islam, as it exists in her universe is normalized. Her daily life as a Muslim does not set her apart. With *Ms. Marvel*, to be a Muslim is to be normal.

My claim that Kamala Khan is normalized, and has normalized Muslims, can be interpreted as removing her Muslim subjectivity. In fact, this has been the critique of her reception among critics and bloggers. More specifically, the claim by reviewers that Kamala is the “kids in America” and that she is “just like us” has been criticized by Miriam Kent in her article *Unveiling Marvels: Ms. Marvel and the Reception of the New Muslim Superheroine*, for not considering “that some of Kamala’s experiences may actually be specific to her subjectivity as a teen Muslim girl in New Jersey (Kent, 2015).” Although there is validity in this analysis, that critics dance with removing Kamala’s voice, there is something to the fact they can say things like “just like us.” Although they do not address who “us” is, there is an assumption that this is done to say that this Pakistani-American Muslim girl is like the larger picture of American readers. This is not said about Dust, Simon Baz, Janissary, Josiah X, this is only said about Kamala. Her ability to reach audiences of non-Muslims, with a distinctly Muslim narrative is her strength, and she is not only reaching them, but is accepted by them. The ability of Wilson to create distinct Muslim characters with different expressions of faith throughout the series but also within Kamala’s family:

We try to show the reader that Islam is not monolithic, that there are divisions of belief and practice within the community and within individual families. The dad is fairly traditional in the sense that he is very protective of his daughter, they argue a lot about her not being able to go out at night to mix-gendered parties. He pushes her a lot to get good grades. Her mom is very concerned about the family pride, wanting Kamala to be a dutiful daughter. Her brother thinks the family is not religious enough, so there is a lot of push and pull at the dinner table. But we wanted to show that this comes from a place of love. This exists in all families so it was very important to us to show that (qtd. In Norris, 2015).

Even with a focus on the ways Islam and Pakistani culture has shaped her family and her journey as a hero, her story still speaks to non-Muslims. Wilson explains that she received tweets from an Orthodox Jewish comic book owner in Long Island who says that Ms. Marvel is just like his childhood (Norris, 2015). For Wilson, the ways that Kamala's story crosses cultural boundaries is the most gratifying quality of her work on the series.

Wilson has been aware of the real challenge she would face in writing to a large audience since her first interviews after the announcement of Kamala's identity. She wrote to the ideas that non-Muslim readers would have, like "'Oh, this character doesn't have anything to say to me specifically,' because it's a character from a very specific background." Making Kamala relatable as well as Muslim was a goal. Islam, through Ms. Marvel, and Muslim religious identity has been normalized to appoint that anyone can accept a Muslim hero is an American Muslim. Upon receiving an international award for "Best Series," Wilson explains the importance of Kamala by stating that, "At a time when it sometimes seems the world is in a state of constant conflict, it is a privilege to work on a series that unites us through adventure, humor and a celebration of our common humanity."

No matter how "normal" Kamala becomes, her character will never stop being a Muslim. It seems, that for both the audience and her community in the Marvel universe, her strong religious and cultural identity does not keep her from becoming a part of the larger pantheon of American superheroes. To critique reception of Kamala as "one of us"

is to ignore how Wilson is writing Muslims into the history of comics in a way that has not been done before.

CONCLUSION

The study of popular culture and more specifically comic books is important because although comics do not “depict the real world, they do mediate it: that is, they respond to, and comment on the world around us (Stromberg, 2011).” Comic books have been used to address real world problems, not just villains with plans for world domination. In the 1941 Captain America was created by Joe Samon and Jack Kirby and was quickly utilized to motivate the war effort after the US became involved in World War II. His most well-known story arcs deal with fighting Nazis and eventually the clandestine organization Hydra, which evolved from Nazi fascination with occult. In a similar fashion, after 9/11 multiple series not only held special issues dealing with the tragedy⁴⁶ directly as well as creating a variety of terrorist villains to be thwarted by superheroes. Most notably of which, is the “Captain America Fights Terrorist” story arc⁴⁷ in *Captain America Vol. 4 #1-5*. In this volume, released shortly after the Black Issue of Amazing Spiderman (*Amazing Spiderman #36*, Straczynski, 2011)⁴⁸. In this volume, Captain America is tasked with saving a city from Faysal Al Tariq and his group of religious radicals.

⁴⁶ Superman, Daredevil, Spiderman, and other heroes who call NYC home have had either entire issues or mentions to 9/11.

⁴⁷ As described by online reviews of the volume as well as the way I had to ask for it when contacting comic book stores while trying to find a copy.

⁴⁸ Released shortly before the 10th anniversary of 9/11), where the only dialogue is his voice over, grieving for his city of New York and how even he was unable to prevent it, including a scene with Captain America standing in the rubble and Spiderman realizing that Cap was around for Pearl Harbor as well. In this issue, the evil of the attacks are highlighted by the inclusion of grieving super-villains Doctor Doom and Magneto gazing upon the rubble, finally ending with a tribute to the everyday American heroes, NYFD and NYPD (*Amazing Spiderman #36*, Straczynski, 2011).

In the same ways comics serve as a way for people to cope with situations, they are also being used to shape narratives of minorities represented on the pages. In the 1990s, Milestone comics was founded and later became a DC imprint, with the goal of creating characters who were not cultural stereotypes and were not the typical white, masculine superheroes. Their line-up included a cast of Asian, Latino, and Black characters, which was highlighted in the multi-cultural team *Blood Syndicate*. Most recently, Ta-Nehesi Coates⁴⁹ has become the new writer for the newest run of Black Panther series. In the same way that Sana Amanat and G. Willow Wilson ushered in a new religious identity in comic, through the super-hero teen Ms. Marvel, other places across the globe are using the image of the super-hero to reconstruct what it means to be a Muslim and in one particular place, a Muslim girl. With *The 99*, we see the first all Muslim-run comic, from publisher, to writer, to illustrator, the identities of the 99 are created from inside the community for the community. In addition to this, the launch of the *Burqa Avenger* animated series in Pakistan, is being used to teach girls strength.

The study of superheroes is one that can be used as a window into how religious identities are constructed for and by communities. Heroes are strong, true, and serve to conquer the troubles their audiences face in day-to-day life. Heroes work to construct identities and serve as a way to see how people interact and think about the world around them. In the articles I have read regarding Muslims in comics, there is often a call for a new superhero. They have commented on the small place that Muslims (and Muslim

⁴⁹ A known writer and journalist for the Atlantic where he writes on cultural and social issues – more specifically how they pertain to African-Americans.

women) hold in comics and how they are often detached from the narrative center (Davis and Westerfelhaus. 2013), the lack of cultural and religious accuracy that helps promote knowledge among the readership (Shaheen, 1994), and a call for Muslim characters to be less simplistic in American comics (Stromberg, 2011).

Although Ms. Marvel has only been in print for a little over a year, her creators have tackled these problems head on. As a headliner of her own comic, she has been moved out of the periphery and into the center of the narrative. She is not a small part of a team; her story is her own. The examples of her faith are culturally specific and the nuanced ways that her first-generation status and instances of bullying are tackled, help to provide a look into the lives of South Asian-American. She is also not simplistic, although her faith is central to her emergence as a super hero, that is not all that she is, she also writes Avenger fan fictions, plays video games, and has boy problems. All of this, I attribute to her creators being inside the communities they are writing about. Although there is much to be done, and one superhero does not make up for the lack of diversity and reinforcement of negative stereotypes upon the religious identity of Muslims in the United States, Kamala Khan serves as a step in the right direction.

It would be hard to make this claim if Ms. Marvel only survived seven issues like *The Crew* or remained a middle of the pack seller like the *New X-Men* series. Upon its launch, *Ms. Marvel*, skyrocketed to #1 on Marvel's digital downloads and outsold *New Avengers*, *Wolverine #1*, and *All-New X-Men* (Gerding, 2014) and sold-out its first print order (Hennon, 2014). This momentum was not a fluke or simple curiosity. After debuting

to critical acclaim, *Ms. Marvel* took home five nominations for Eisner Awards⁵⁰ (Best New Series, Best Writer, Penciller/Inker, Cover Artist, and Lettering), and two nominations for the Harvey Award⁵¹ (Best New Series and Best Writer). In addition to these nominations in 2015, *Ms. Marvel* also took home the prolific Hugo Award – presented by the Science Fiction Society beginning in 1953 - for Best Graphic Story. At the start of 2016, *Ms. Marvel*, took home the award for Best Series at the Angoulême International Comics Festival. With this award, *Ms. Marvel* solidified its place among the comic industry’s heavy hitters at home and abroad. The Angoulême International Comics Festival recognizes the best and brightest creators from around the world, often being noted as the “Cannes of Comics.” With this win, Marvel was the only American comic book publisher recognized at the 2016 festival and also served as the first time Marvel received an award as significant as “Best Series” from the festival overall (Marvel News, 2016). *Ms. Marvel* also took home the Dwayne McDuffie for Diversity in comics, in February of 2016. Wilson credited the wide fan base and cosplayers for the win.

Kamala’s significance is not small or niche. She is as mainstream as Superman or Spiderman and has been added to the roster of one the most notable superhero teams in comics: The Avengers. Kamala, now a member of *The All New, All Different Avenger*⁵², will be added to the cannon of Marvel’s animated universe. Kamala is set to join the Disney

⁵⁰ The Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards, began in 1988, and are awarded for creative achievement in American Comic Books.

⁵¹ Began in 1988 as a way to commemorate achievement in comic books.

⁵² Marvel’s new diverse spin on the existing team with a second Black Captain America, a Puerto Rican American Spiderman, a Latino Nova, and a female Thor.

XD's third season of *Avengers Assemble*, and will be voiced by Bollywood star, Priyanka Chopra in the new Avenger mobile game, *Marvel Avengers Academy*. In addition to this, she has been “brickified” and added to the widely played LEGO video games in *LEGO Marvel's Avengers*. Although her introduction into other platforms outside comics are mediated by the Avengers team, the significance her introduction into your living room⁵³, game console, and cell phone, shows that she has reached a level of recognition unheard of for other Muslim superheroes.

Only time will tell if Kamala's story remains grounded in the Muslim community or if she remains largely unproblematic. It will also be interesting to see Kamala tackle issues affecting the real world. However, already in her fifth volume, the *Ms. Marvel* series doesn't look like it is stopping and although she tackles issues of cultural difference, misinformation about Islamic practices and every-day bullying, her image is being used by people to respond to the negative religious identities being created for Muslims in the real world. During the 2016 Presidential campaign, GOP frontrunners have made many disparaging comments about Muslims in the US and abroad. In response to Donald Trump's plan for deporting of Muslims and banning entry to the US for Muslim refugees and immigrants, fan artist has depicted her fighting a Hitler-styled Trump. Beyond fan use of her image, like this and the case in San Francisco, during an appearance on *Late Night*

⁵³ In addition to her inclusion in the animated series, her posters have been found in ABC programming, specifically *Modern Family* – not surprising since both ABC and Marvel are owned by Disney.

With Seth Meyers, Sana Amanat responded to the question, “What would Kamala say to Donald Trump?”:

The first thing that she would say is that he’s doing such irreparable damage to young Americans and minorities everywhere. Young Americans. Words and images are really powerful, and these young kids are actually having a perception of themselves that are not true. That’s dangerous.

Then, she’d probably remind him that his grandfather was an immigrant, I believe? And if he had the same type of vitriolic sentiment being thrown at him, Trump would not have the opportunities that he would have or the successes that he would have. **Then she’d probably fly off with the Avengers and save the world from actual bad guys and prove him wrong about who Muslims really are.** (*Late Night with Seth Meyers*, January 2016)

As Amanat explains, Kamala serves to show who “Muslims really are.” At the end of the interview she also explains one of the conspiracies she heard about herself and *Ms. Marvel*. As she explains it, Amanat was sent to infiltrate the government through Marvel and push the Muslim Brotherhood’s agenda in the US while enforcing Sharia Law. The cultural relevance of a character like Kamala can be understood this interview and even more so in the ways the public uses her image. Kamal Khan is important; she is the new standard of Muslims in comics. She is Muslim and she is American.

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